

***Highway Construction: Finding the Fabula in David Lynch's Lost Highway***

It could have been a straightforward murder mystery: a beautiful woman is brutally murdered, and her husband is videotaped in the act of dismembering her. But it gets a little more complicated: why can't he remember the killing? And who did the videotaping? And before we even have time to answer these questions, we are presented with one that is even more difficult to answer: *where did the husband go, and who is that sitting in his jail cell instead?* The questions keep coming, and the answers get fewer and farther between. Such is the *syuzhet* (or plot) of *Lost Highway*, the most recent film by acclaimed director David Lynch. The film constantly challenges, obstructs, and defies our attempts to answer questions, to make connections, to construct a cohesive *fabula* (or story) out of the sinister and surreal *syuzhet*. What is the link between *fabula* and *syuzhet*? How does Lynch disrupt our attempt to forge this link? And perhaps most importantly, why does he do so? This essay will attempt to answer these questions.

In his book *Narration in the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell defines the *fabula* of a film as “[t]he imaginary construct we create, progressively and retroactively...the *fabula* embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field.”<sup>1</sup> According to Bordwell, the *fabula* is put together by the spectator from the *syuzhet*: “usually translated as “plot”...the actual presentation of the *fabula* in the film. It is not the text in toto” (50). In turn, the *syuzhet* is often supported or enhanced by the film's *style*, or “the film's systematic use of cinematic devices” (50); the filmmaker's choice of style (in camera angles, editing, lighting, sound, *mise-en-scène*, and a variety of other factors) can influence how the spectator interprets the *syuzhet*, and consequently affects the spectator's construction of the *fabula*. Narration, then, is “the

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<sup>1</sup> Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 49. Further references to this edition are in parentheses in the text.

process whereby the film's syuzhet and style interact in the course of cueing and channeling the spectator's construction of the fabula" (53).

In other words, when presented with a film's syuzhet, a spectator continually attempts to build a chronologically complete narrative—a "story world"—out of the blocks of events she sees on the screen. This involves more than simple additive processes of placing events in the correct order, for most if not all films leave out at least small bits of time or information; it is up to the viewer to *infer* the nature of these gaps. Indeed, the relationships between the information the viewer *is* presented may be of an uncertain nature, requiring further mental cogitation and construction if a fabula is to be constructed. Logical, temporal, and spatial considerations raised by the syuzhet all contribute to this constructive process (51). A wide range of filmic techniques are at the filmmaker's disposal to help or hinder the process, according to the needs of the story.

As Bordwell points out, certain film genres—particularly mysteries, thrillers, and suspense films—deliberately block the translation of syuzhet to fabula to a much greater degree than more straightforward genres, in order to achieve desired effects of puzzlement, fear, and shock. By withholding certain information and presenting other information with which we are not yet equipped to deal, a filmmaker can keep the spectator guessing till the very end. At that point, all is usually revealed and a fabula is successfully constructed (often by both the spectator and the characters themselves) (52). However, an even more radical approach can be taken: as Bordwell puts it, "[a]t local points, 'ordinary films can indulge in either overload or rarefaction tactics; and extraordinary films can indulge in either, or both, consistently and throughout'" (52).

One such extraordinary film is *Lost Highway*.<sup>2</sup> The first half of the film concerns Fred Madison, a jazz musician who, along with his doomed wife Renée, is being videotaped in his sleep by persons unknown. The second half is centered around Pete Dayton, a young auto mechanic who is led into a web of intrigue and deceit by Alice, the girlfriend of the wealthy

and dangerous Mr. Eddy. The two tales are woven together in a fugue-like pattern, linked primarily by the fact that Pete has mysteriously appeared in Fred's jail cell. The nature of this bizarre, seemingly supernatural occurrence, and therefore the nature of the reality/cosmology inhabited by both Fred and Pete, is the primary mystery to be unraveled in the film. In other words, *Lost Highway* goes beyond conventional mystery films in that the gaps in the fabula which the spectator must fill in are much larger and wider in scope than simple "who killed who"s—they're "who *is* who"s (and "what is what"s). In Bordwellian terms, they are "diffuse gaps," which "[yield] more room for open-ended inferential work [on the spectator's part]" (55). Consequently, Lynch must take a much obfuscatory approach than normal in the construction of his syuzhet in order to maintain such large fabula gaps for the duration of the film. To do so, Lynch employs many more-or-less standard hindering devices, but in unusual or unorthodox ways.

A prime example of the techniques Lynch utilizes is the "flaunted gap", a hole in the syuzhet wherein "we know that there is something we need to know" (55). Our lack of knowledge of this something creates a feeling of suspense, apprehension, and bewilderment (55). Perhaps the most prominent "flaunted gap" in the film is found in the description of what happened to Pete the night before he was found in Fred's jail cell. In a flashback repeated three times (just before Pete is discovered in the cell, during Pete's conversation with his parents about the jail incident, and when Pete's girlfriend Sheila confronts him about his affair with Alice) we see Pete's front yard; we see his parents standing by the door of the house in the background and Sheila screaming his name in the foreground; we see bright flashes of white light (similar to the light that accompanied Fred's apparent transformation into Pete); we see Pete's parents run as if to stop Pete from doing something. We never see Pete, what he's doing, or where he's going; we never see the mysterious man who accompanied Pete that night, according to his parents; we never see whatever it was that made it apparent to Sheila that Pete was "different," as she disparagingly calls him. To

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<sup>2</sup> *Lost Highway*. Dir. David Lynch. 134 min. October films, 1996, videocassette, widescreen edition.

flaunt these gaps even further, Pete's parents pointedly and repeatedly refuse to tell him what they saw that night.

Naturally, we are inclined to attempt to fill in these gaps with syuzhet information we already have. Since the bright light we see in the flashback also accompanied Fred's pre-disappearance/transformation freak-out, we naturally assume the two are connected. We surmise that the man whom Pete's father had "never seen before" that night is the same Mystery Man that talked to Fred from two places at once (in person and on the phone) at a party earlier in the film. We infer that the Mystery Man somehow took Pete from his house and put him in the jail cell. We may even attribute some sort of supernatural nature to Pete which manifested itself that night, leading to Sheila's claim that Pete is "different." All these inferences seem to construct a satisfactory fabula. In a conventional mystery, we would learn which of these hypothetical fabula formulations is "correct" by the end of the movie.

Of course, this is a David Lynch film, and therefore "unconventional" almost by definition. In a brazen attack on the spectator's attempts at fabula formation, Lynch leaves the gaps about Pete's fateful night unfilled. We never find out the answers to any of the questions we (both the spectators and Pete himself) have about the events of that night. Of course, other films leave gaps unfilled, creating a sense of uneasiness and uncertainty in the viewer. But the gap in question here is of incredible importance to our understanding of the film: how did Pete get into Fred's jail cell? Without a firm knowledge of the connection between Fred and Pete—be it magical, metaphysical, or mundane—we really can't be sure of *anything*. So crucial is an understanding of the Pete/Fred link to our understanding of the movie as a whole that even the nature of the film's "reality" is called into question. The fact that this gap in our knowledge of Pete and Fred's stories was flaunted so mercilessly in the three flashback scenes only heightens the daring nature of Lynch's construction of the film.

Lynch creates an even bolder impediment to the spectator's syuzhet/fabula translation through an extensive and subversive use of "redundancy." According to Bordwell, almost every syuzhet utilizes extensive repetitions, restatements, and reillustrations in

“functional, significant” ways in order to “reinforce assumptions, inferences, and hypotheses about story information” (56-57). Such repetitions are known as “redundancy,” and are so pervasive that we hardly ever notice them—until, that is, “we encounter a text that is...not redundant in ways that we are used to” (57).

*Lost Highway*, of course, is a textbook case of such a text. Rather than reinforcing our assumptions regarding the relationships between different elements of the syuzhet, the redundancy we come across in this movie thwarts and confuses our attempts to construct a fabula. In a sense, this technique is the exact opposite of the “flaunted gap”—it provides us with too *much* information, rather than too little, overloading rather than rarefying. We attempt and fail to make sense of the constant repetitions we discover.

For example, almost all the main characters in the movie have “doubles” of some sort. Fred is somehow linked to Pete; Renée and Alice are doppelgängers; Mr. Eddy is referred to interchangeably as Dick Laurent; even the Mystery Man appears to be in two places at once. By creating “redundant” characters, Lynch raises more questions than he answers, leaving us struggling to make connections and build a feasible fabula. Who is the “real” half of each double, and what is the relationship between each half? Our understanding of the film hinges on the answers to those questions—questions that are never answered.

Similarly, conversations or lines of dialogue from the Fred section of the film are repeated almost verbatim in the Pete section, but in different contexts. Notable among these are the conversations Pete and Fred have with the Mystery Man, who says to them both, “We’ve met before, haven’t we?...At your house, don’t you remember?” This particular repetition, besides making us wonder which character is the “real” main character, also alludes to previous conversations with the Mystery Man—that is, it’s a repetition *of a repetition*, adding yet another level of confusion! In another case, both Fred and Pete are told by their respective love interests that they (the women) met Andy (the host of the party mentioned earlier, a director of pornographic films, and a friend of Mr. Eddy’s) “at a place called Moke’s...[where] he told [them] about a job.” The conversation with Fred stops here; the

conversation with Pete continues to describe how this job interview set-up led to Alice's startling introduction into the world of pornography and Mr. Eddy. We are left to wonder whether Renée had a similar experience—indeed, whether Renée and Alice's experiences were one and the same, as is the actress who portrays them both. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the first and last lines of the film are identical: "Dick Laurent is dead." Said by Fred (after the murder of Renée, the transformation into Pete, the disappearance of Alice, and the murder of Mr. Eddy/Dick Laurent) to Fred (*before* all these events), the line does nothing less than call into question the temporality of the entire film. Should we even attempt to construct a fabula with a beginning, middle, and end, a fabula with a set of main characters performing a well-defined set of actions and moving toward a specific end?

The answer, I would submit, is no. Instead of the linear fabula to which we are accustomed, wherein everything is explained or discarded, Lynch has created a loop, or perhaps more accurately a Moebius strip. Start at any point in the syuzhet, construct a fabula from there, and you will only end up right back where you started. Different theories can be and have been posited to explain the loop, the most plausible of which might be that Pete is a psychological projection of Fred, one where his sexual dysfunction becomes sexual prowess and his murder of an innocent becomes his seduction by a femme fatale. Conversely, Fred may be a projection of Pete's, one where his lack of authority in life becomes the authorship of a crime, and his corrupt lover becomes an innocent victim. The loop might arise due to the failure of each projection to remain an ideal state for the projector—after all, death, fear, and sexual misery exist in both worlds. In an entirely different theory, the Mystery Man is a supernatural entity not unlike those in Lynch's television series *Twin Peaks* and its big screen prequel, *Fire Walk With Me*. In this theory, the loop is an outgrowth of the paranormal concepts of alternate worlds, doppelgängers, and spiritual possession that Lynch explored in the *Twin Peaks* saga. The point is, these are simply *theories*—never are they explicitly endorsed by the film. The loop being constructed, it is left to the viewer to make of it what she will.

*Lost Highway* is a calculated, deliberate, brilliant formal experiment, wherein David Lynch consciously destroys traditional syuzhet/fabula relations in order to craft an altogether different form narrative. The film requires a great deal from its viewers—repeated viewings, hours of discussion—due to its novel and unorthodox fabula. This unusual and unprecedented level of involvement is precisely what Lynch intends. His constant subversion of the spectator's narrative processes, both through rarefaction (via flaunted, diffuse, and permanent gaps) and overloading (via unorthodox redundancy and repetition) lead to an altogether new conception of the fabula, with all the logical, spatial, and temporal ramifications such novelty implies. It creates a uniquely rewarding and entertaining viewing experience. We are indeed left stranded on a Lost Highway, but we are better off for the journey.